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JOHN RUSKIN:  
HIS LIFE AND WORK.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE

*THE RUSKIN SOCIETY OF GLASGOW*

BY THE PRESIDENT,

WILLIAM SMART.



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For out of olde felles as men seith  
Cometh al this newe corn fro yere to yere  
And out of olde booke in good feith  
Cometh al this newe science that men leue

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IT is no light task that falls upon me, as President of this Society, to deliver its inaugural address. I am conscious that I have before me comparatively few who come as members of the Ruskin Society, or as sympathizers with its work ; and that the bulk of my audience is composed of those who hold very different opinions ;—from those who look upon John Ruskin merely as a brilliant writer on Art, down the varying scale, to those who come to hear something in defence of one they consider a mere enthusiast.

To the former class I feel that I can say very little that is new, not being by any means the best qualified among them to say even that : while, in regard to the latter, I am aware that, by want of skill in setting forth the truths Mr. Ruskin has devoted his life to teach, I may raise such a prejudice against him in their minds as will vitiate any effect that the chance reading of his works might hereafter have. And when, looking around me, I see not only those whose views of life must have been more or less shaped by commercial pursuits, but also many whose lives have been spent in the domain of thought, and in the search for truth, I realize most fully the responsibility attaching to one who preaches what may seem a new gospel.

Of you, then, who know Mr Ruskin and his writings as well as I do, I must beg indulgence if I traverse ground which is already a beaten track to you, while I speak to that widerpart of my audience which knows him only by name and his writings by report.

There is probably no other great writer of whom so little is now known, and that after forty years of continuous literary work, as John Ruskin. One knows him not at all—not even by name : another knows him only as an art critic : a third, as an aesthetic philosopher, whose work on art has unfitted him for any practical views of life, and made him a dangerous guide in morals. A more numerous class regard him as a dreamer, or, less ambiguously, an amiable madman.

For it is a sorrowful fact that a self-styled practical world is just as apt, in the nineteenth century, Anno Domini, to say of its greatest men, as it did four thousand years ago, “behold this dreamer cometh ;” or, at a later date, and of a greater than man, “he hath a devil and is mad.” And, of our madman, we must again answer as one of the same class did for himself—‘Not mad, most noble world, but speaking forth the words of truth and soberness.’

It would be curious, and perhaps interesting, to examine the grounds on which an arrogant ignorance fixes the stigma of madness on Mr. Ruskin, but I will only mention *three*, and, for refutation, do little more than leave it to your good judgment, when I have set forth his teaching, with such extracts from his works as may be necessary.

For seventeen years Mr. Ruskin's name was in every one's mouth as the model and mirror of prose writers. His grace of diction was unequalled ; his canons of art stood firm against all criticism ; the loftiness of his moral teaching was almost inspired. But, one day, the unequalled style, the stern logic, and sterner purity of mind, were all concentrated into one sweeping denunciation of the social system of the nineteenth century ; declaring that our greed of gold had led us to such a state of wretchedness, degradation, and folly as were never witnessed before in any state, savage or civilized, and that, for salvation of the nation, we must return to the simple rules of our Master, Christ. Naturally, the practical world resented the imputation that its boasted civilization was a mistake. The merchant derided the idea that he existed, not that he might make money for himself, but that his employés might live. The professional man did not like being told that, in the soul of things, he deserved less reward than the agricultural labourer, for his work, because his real reward was *in* his work, while the labourer's was *for* it. And one and all declared that the Sermon on the Mount was a beautiful ideal—but totally impracticable.

Strong words, my friends, but I hope to show you,—or, if I cannot, it is my fault, not his,—that Mr. Ruskin asks no more, in any book of his, than that man should obey the law of life given from Christ's own mouth : and the newspaper press of this country, by its almost unanimous derision of his later books, shows how far we have fallen from any realization of pure religion.

But he is content to take lower ground than this. Even supposing that our hopes for a future life be taken as groundless,—that our faith is vain,—and that the ears of those who have travelled to the farthest confines of thought have heard only the cry of a fatherless world, Mr. Ruskin takes his stand on those simple laws of justice and mercy which constitute the morality underlying *all* religions of the world, and says no more and no less, than that the nation which has left these must retrace its steps, or, as a nation, perish. Maybe a gloomy view, but, assuredly, not a mad one !

Another ground of his supposed madness merely rests in the general—and no less foolish than general—opinion that anything worth knowing can be known at a casual reading, and that all truth is expressed in one unvarying mode of simplicity. Those who judge thus forget that scholars and thinkers for the last eighteen hundred years have been digging deep in the resources of one book alone, and do not seem to have at all exhausted them ; they forget the innumerable commentaries on our own Shakespeare, as well as on every other great writer of the past ; they forget the somewhat amazing fact that there is one man, now living, confessedly the greatest thinker of modern times, whose books are yet not understood by even a tithe of the reading public—Thomas Carlyle.

That two men should give forth substantially the same message—the one, indeed, everywhere acknowledging the other as master—and yet the one be honoured, the other

scorned, seems due to the fact that Carlyle's rugged strength carries conviction of its truth, even where only slightly understood:—just as the grip of death carries conviction of the existence of a God to the dullest blockhead. But Mr. Ruskin, with a strength of conviction, and force of eloquence not second to Carlyle, has a heart as gentle and womanlike as it is strong; it pities and loves even where it despises: his amazement at the blindness which does not realize, and the indifference which allows, the festering mass of human misery around, bursts out in passionate, uncontrollable indignation: he is driven to preach recklessly, as it seems, in season and out of season:—conjuring for love, threatening by prophesied calamity, startling by strange rhetoric, if, by any means, he may awake a world which sleeps on the verge of its ruin.

As usual the newspapers, catering more for the amusement than the good of their readers, and neglectful of their mighty, almost infinite responsibility, take care to publish those parts of his writings which may raise a smile or provoke a sneer. But, if ever the canon of criticism put forth by himself applied to any one, it does to him:—

\* *“Be sure,” he says, “if the author is worth anything you will not get at his meaning all at once—nay, that at his whole meaning you will not for a long time arrive in any wise. Not that he does not say what he means, and in strong*

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\* SESAME AND LILIES, p. 13.

*words too ; but he cannot say it all ; and what is more strange, will not but in a hidden way, and in parables, in order that he may be sure you want it."*

There is a third ground for the accusation of madness which I can only touch with reverent hands.

Endowed with that rare delight in nature granted only to great painters and poets, he has seen into nature and its mysterious connections with the powers above us as we cannot see. Not without reason did Wordsworth write :—

*" To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."*

and the wonderful ways in which, to the poet, external nature symbolizes and enshrines the spiritual, are apt to excite ridicule among those of whom Peter Bell was pilloried as everlasting type in the famous "yellow primrose" stanza.

And, as devoting all his life to Art, he has had to face the mysterious study of the meaning of the many religions which have only, or *best*, expressed themselves in their art : he has had the problem continually before him of reconciling the art, the religion, and the history of peoples.

But when, as result of all this life-long study, he proclaims, that not alone in Protestantism, not even in all the Churches which unite themselves only under the name of Christian,—but *everywhere*,—in all art, in all religions, in all history,—he finds God working : that even the Greek myths have lessons for us Christians : and that in that far-off age the storied

heroes and demigods were probably such messengers as God saw fit for the times—of course the modern religious world which prays weekly for a Church Universal, but hates the rival denomination over the way, finds this man an enthusiast, a dreamer, a madman—even a dangerous one.

But let any one who thinks such ideas merely the extravagance of a poet's dream, in his next woodland walk, try at anyrate to imagine that the flowers which meet his careless eye have a something resembling human life,—that the rose blushes with delight in our admiration, and the lily grows pale with rapture ; let him fancy that the dog which leaps and gambols responsive to the joy in his master's eye, or crouches sadly sympathetic in his sorrow, has a counterpart in all the living things that too often shrink and fly from the ill-usage they have learned to expect ; let him only try to imagine all this, and *human* life will become more sacred to him ; he will get a better idea of John Ruskin,—and of God.

I would it were *possible* to give you any idea how foolish and cruel this imputation of madness, or anything approaching to it, is. If it were only himself who was now addressing you, instead of a very humble though faithful disciple : if you could see that spare stooping figure, that rough hewn kindly face, with its mobile, sensitive mouth, and clear deep eyes, so sweet and honest in repose, so keen, and earnest and eloquent in debate, you would feel how noble and true a gentleman he is. But a life spent in unselfish work has

well earned the repose which sixty years demand. We cannot hope for many more public appearances from him ; and we must accept his own statement as final, when he says that he has told us what truth it is necessary for us to know, and that, if we will not learn from what he has already written, he can teach us no more. But I must warn you in this, that unless you approach the study of his works with somewhat of a belief in the man, and of sympathy with him, you will come little speed.—\* *“It is quite possible,” he says, “for the simplest workman or labourer for whom I write to understand what the feelings of a gentleman are, and share them, if he will ; but the crisis and horror of this present time are that its desire of money, and the fulness of luxury dishonestly attainable by common persons, are gradually making churls of all men ; and the nobler passions are not merely disbelieved, but even the conception of them seems ludicrous to the impotent churl mind ; so that, to take only so poor an instance of them as my own life—because I have passed it in almsgiving, not in fortune-hunting ; because I have laboured always for the honour of others, not my own, and have chosen rather to make men look to Turner and Luini, than to form or exhibit the skill of my own hand ; because I have lowered my rents, and assured the comfortable lives of my poor tenants, instead of taking from them all I could force for the roofs they needed ; because I love a wood walk better than a London street ; and*

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\* FORS IV., 41-103.



would rather watch a seagull fly than shoot it, and rather hear a thrush sing than eat it ; finally, because I never disobeyed my mother, because I have honoured all women with solemn worship, and have been kind even to the unthankful and the evil ; therefore the hacks of English art and literature wag their heads at me, and the poor wretch who pawns the dirty linen of his soul daily for a bottle of sour wine and a cigar, talks of the ‘effeminate sentimentality of Ruskin.’ ”

It is then in the hope of convincing you that in Mr. Ruskin we have not merely a great writer, but a great teacher, that I have chosen to speak of his *life* as well as his work.

We Scotch get the name of being hard-headed. We are ready to suspect and despise humbug and sham—having so much in us at anyrate of the man we boast as one of our race. We do not easily believe in a man who preaches one thing and lives another. \* “*I am convinced,*” says Ruskin himself, “*that it is by his personal conduct that any man of ordinary power will do the greatest amount of good that it is in him to do.*” And I think I am right in supposing that you will the more readily credit his teaching, when I can show you how entirely noble, and, in the truest sense, consistent, his whole life has been.

John Ruskin was born in London in February, 1819.—† “*My father,*” he says, in one of the autobiographical passages

\* FORS II., 21, 2.

† FORS I., 10, 5.

in the Fors., “*began business as a wine-merchant, with no capital, and a considerable amount of debts bequeathed him by my grandfather. He accepted the bequest and paid them all before he began to lay by anything for himself, for which his best friends called him a fool, and I, without expressing my opinion as to his wisdom, which I knew in such matters to be at least equal to mine, have written on the granite slab over his grave that he was ‘an entirely honest merchant.’*”

His parents were cousins, and of Scotch descent. Probably in virtue of this Scotch blood they were somewhat severe in their training of this, their only son. A lonely child, with no companions, scant toys, and few books, he grew up a quiet, meditative boy. His books, however, if few, were of the best.—\* “*I had Walter Scott’s novels, and the Iliad, (Pope’s translation), for my only reading when I was a child, on week days: on Sundays their effect was tempered by ‘Robinson Crusoe’ and the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ my mother having it deeply in her heart to make an evangelical clergyman of me. Fortunately, I had an aunt more evangelical than my mother; and my aunt gave me cold mutton for Sunday’s dinner, which—as I much preferred it hot—greatly diminished the influence of the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ and the end of the matter was, that I got all the noble imaginative teaching of Defoe and Bunyan, and yet—am not an evangelical clergyman. I had, however, still better teaching than theirs, and that compulsorily and every day of the week. Walter Scott and Pope’s Homer*

were reading of my own election, but my mother forced me, by steady daily toil, to learn long chapters of the Bible by heart ; as well as to read it every syllable through, aloud, hard names and all, from Genesis to the Apocalypse, about once a year ; and to that discipline—patient, accurate, and resolute—I owe, not only a knowledge of the book, which I find occasionally serviceable, but much of my general power of taking pains, and the best part of my taste in literature.”

\* “For toys,” he says, “I had a bunch of keys to play with, as long as I was capable only of pleasure in what glittered and jingled ; as I grew older, I had a cart, and a ball ; and when I was five or six years old, two boxes of well-cut wooden bricks. With these modest, but, I still think, entirely sufficient possessions, and being always summarily whipped if I cried, did not do as I was bid, or tumbled on the stairs, I soon attained serene and secure methods of life and motion ; and could pass my days contentedly in tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet ;—examining the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses. . . . But the carpet, and what patterns I could find in bed-covers, dresses, or wall papers to be examined, were my chief resources, and my attention to the particulars in these was soon so accurate, that when at three and a half I was taken to have my portrait painted by Mr. Northcote, I had not been ten minutes alone with him before I asked him why there were holes in his carpet.”

Whatever we may think of the wisdom of such training, it is to this limitation of books and toys that he owes that habit of attention to particulars, that power of concentration, and that delight in little things, which have made him at once so great as a writer and an art student. Every year his father made a two months' driving tour through England on business, and if, in the course of the mid-day drive there were any gentleman's house to be seen, his father baited the horses, and father, mother, and son went reverently through the state rooms.—\* *"My father," he says, "had a quite infallible natural judgment in painting. . . . He never, when I was old enough to care for what he himself delighted in, allowed me to look for an instant at a bad picture; and, if there were a Reynolds, Velasquez, Vandyck, or Rembrandt in the rooms, he would pay the surliest housekeepers into patience until we had seen it to heart's content; if none of these, I was allowed to look at Guido, Carlo Dolce—or the more skilful masters of the Dutch School,—Cuyph, Teniers, Hobbima, Wouvermans; but never at any second-rate or doubtful examples."*

It was the fond hope of his friends that he would enter the Church—"He might have been a Bishop," said his mother once, with tears in her eyes; but the young man's mind was early turned to his future work by getting a present of Roger's Italy, illustrated by Turner, in whom he hence-

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\* FORS V., 56-227.

forth became an ardent believer. His first education was done under worthy tutorship in his father's house, from which he went straight to Christ Church, Oxford. The Newdigate Prize for the poem "Salsette and Elephanta," and a complimentary fourth class pass, were his only achievements. But under Dr. Buckland he laid the foundation of that thorough geological knowledge which became so valuable to him as an art critic. Thereafter he studied the elements of drawing and painting under Copley Fielding and J. D. Harding, and spent much of his time in the galleries of Italy.

At the age of twenty-four appeared the first volume of his great work '**Modern Painters.**' Originating, as he says, in indignation at the shallow and false criticism of the periodicals of the day on the works of Turner, it had amplified itself into something very like a treatise on Art. Turner was now sixty-eight. Five years before he had painted the Old Temeraire, and he was still in the zenith of his power. For years he had held the leading place among the landscape painters of England, but his fame had lasted too long for a novelty-loving public, and the press had begun to write him down. Public taste, to use Ruskin's words, was seemingly plunging deeper and deeper in degradation every day, in admiration of all that was theatrical, affected, and false in art. Never was such a daring attempt. For a youth of twenty-four to take up the position that Turner was the greatest landscape painter the world had ever seen, and to prove it by

formulating the before unwritten canons of art, was Titanic work ;—but never was daring crowned with such success. Henceforth Turner's place in art was secure, and Ruskin took his own place in the first rank of English writers.

'Modern Painters' remains, perhaps, the most wonderful example of youthful genius extant. The reader cannot but be amazed that the exact observation of nature, and the exhaustive study of the productions of painters, ancient and modern, could have left time for the grasp and extent of erudition it evidences. But, if for nothing else, Ruskin deserves the thanks of succeeding generations for elevating criticism of Art into an art of itself, and delivering us from the diatribes of those who thought that the only thing necessary to criticize the productions of the brush was the possession of a pen.

Three years later appeared the second volume ; ten years after that, volumes third and fourth ; and the last volume in 1860. Between times, in 1849, appeared the 'Seven Lamps of Architecture,' being an application of the principles of 'Modern Painters' to the sister art ; and, in 1851, the 'Stones of Venice,' being a discourse on the history, art, and moral decline of that Queen of Cities. It is, of course, impossible to do any justice to these three stupendous treatises on Art in a few sentences. I give Mr. Ruskin's own epitome :—  
*" 'MODERN PAINTERS' teaches the claim of all lower nature on the hearts of men : of the rock and wave and herb as a part of their necessary spirit life. It declares the perfectness and*

*eternal beauty of the work of God, and tests all work of man by concurrence with, or subjection to that." Of the others, he says, that they "teach the laws of constructive art, and the dependence of all human work or edifice for its beauty on the happy life of the workman."*

In 1860, after some minor works, lectures, and pamphlets, appeared the famous four essays in the 'Cornhill,' reprinted under the title of 'Unto this Last,' being an attack on the popular conception and tendency of Political Economy. They were founded on the perfectly just basis that Political Economists of the school of Mill and Ricardo, instead of analyzing the true economy of a State, had analyzed the modern outcome of wealth and money-making as it exists in the present corrupt state of society, and had taught their students that the deductions from this were the eternal laws of wealth and commerce. 'Unto this Last' expounds the true economy of a State which takes for its first aim the healthy and happy life of the people; and, at the same time, it teaches that the first duty of the citizen is to carry out this true Economy in his own life and business.

'Mumera Pulveris,' six essays on the Elements of Political Economy, soon followed, being an expansion of the same views,—'Political Economy plus Philanthropy,' as it was scornfully called.

The part of his life during which he was writing these was spent partly at home, partly in Italy and Switzerland;

all his energies being given to ascertain the truth of natural forms, fixed and accidental. No one will ever have any idea of the actual art work he did in the course of his long life, in study and preparation for his books. It is with no amateur we are dealing. What he might have been as an artist, and what he resigned in not becoming one, is enough evidenced by such of his drawings as have seen the light.

And here I must ask you to note how perfectly and entirely noble his art life has been. Endowed with every capacity to be a great artist, seeing and loving nature as only poets do, watching and catching her varying moods as only painters can, and with a technical aptitude which might have been the willing slave of these, he had the strength of self-denial to follow the advice he gives to others—“*In a general way remember that it is far better to find out other great men than to become one yourself, for you can but become one at the best, but you can bring others to light in numbers*”—advice which I cannot but think most essential in an age when every man thinks his own half-digested opinions as good as the life thoughts of a great man.

But this is the key-note of Ruskin's whole life,—it has been entirely spent for others. He has gone through life with all the chivalry of a knight of old, a freelance for the defence of what was noble and true against the base and the churlish. First, as the champion of Turner; then as the champion of the noble in art against the untrue and the degrading; then in the defence of all natural beauty against



man's desecration ; finally, standing forth against those foul forms of our national life which degrade man while they increase gold—you will find equally perfect consistency throughout his life and his teaching ; he has never worked for honour or reward, but always for others.

Of his various other works on life, art, mythology, &c., written between 1860 and 1870, valuable as they are, I have no time to say anything, except that 'Sesame and Lilies,' and the 'Crown of Wild Olive,' contain perhaps the finest passages in the whole range of English prose, the former in the lecture entitled 'Queens' Gardens,' the latter in the lecture on War.

In 1870 Oxford honoured herself by appointing him to the chair of Fine Art, then newly founded. As a Professor, I may say that he roused the passionate enthusiasm of his students. Indeed his personal influence has always been notoriously so powerful that he made it a point of honour in Oxford not to mix much personally with his students, in case he should be suspected of unduly influencing them. And from my own experience, limited as it has been, I can endorse what those nearest him have said to me—"he is a man one could die for,—or better, live for."

One episode at Oxford was much talked of, and laughed at, at the time—the "digging." As usual, Mr. Ruskin, looking out for other people's good, thought that the superfluous energy the men got rid of on the river and in the gymnasium, might be profitably and pleasantly spent to some good end.

“Will none of you,” he said, “of your strength and your leisure do anything for the poor—drain a single cottage, repair a single village byeway—and you yourselves will be more strong, and your hearts more light, than had your leisure been spent in costly games, or more hurtful amusement.” About fifty men responded, and set to work under Ruskin’s old head gardener to make a road past a few cottages which were without a decent bye-way. The digging went on vigorously for some time, but eventually the diggers dropped off, and the scheme was abandoned,—chiefly, I have been informed by one of the diggers, because the rustics stood round with their hands in their pockets and laughed! If there is one thing which is harder for the ordinary English gentleman to stand than another, it is to be laughed at.

In 1871, a year after taking the Art Chair, he began the ‘Fors Clavigera,’ that much derided and much misunderstood series of Letters to the Labourers and Workmen of Great Britain. A few words as to the causes which led to this step. An intense admirer of Carlyle, he shared with him the expectation that the higher classes would gradually come to realize their duty toward the lower. But all that Carlyle had written in 1843, when he began ‘Past and Present’ with the words:—“*The condition of England is justly regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest ever seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition.*”—remained true in 1871.

Ruskin saw and felt, as only a true man can, that the lust of gold was debasing our humanity ; that, against it, all the revelation of that nature which it desecrates, and all the rights of man which it tramples on, are powerless.

But Carlyle had ended his life work, and was silent : the mighty pen that had written the ‘ Latter Day Pamphlets,’ was laid down, and men had already forgotten the prophecy of woe and warning. A first place in the national literature was indeed awarded him without question. His books were such as ‘ no gentleman’s library is complete without ’ ; but of practical following of his teaching there was nothing. His winged words lay deep in some few scholars’ hearts, but from the leaders of labour to whom he trusted there came no response. No landowner stirred from his position as heaven-appointed beatitude ; statues to Hudson still remained the national sculpture ; and the gulf between rich and poor yawned yet wider and deeper.

On 1st January, 1871, Ruskin began the ‘ Fors Clavigera ’ with the memorable words:—“ *Friends, we begin to-day another group of ten years, not in happy circumstances. Although, for the time, exempted from the direct calamities which have fallen on neighbouring states, believe me, we have not escaped them because of our better deservings, nor by our better wisdom ; but only for one of two bad reasons, or for both : either that we have not sense enough to determine in a great national quarrel which side is right, or that we have not courage to defend the right, when we have discerned it. I believe that both these*

*bad reasons exist in full force ; that our own political divisions prevent us from understanding the laws of international justice ; and that, even if we did, we should not dare to defend, perhaps not even to assert them, being on this first of January, 1871, in much bodily fear ; that is to say, afraid of the Russians ; afraid of the Prussians ; afraid of the Americans ; afraid of the Hindoos ; afraid of the Chinese ; afraid of the Japanese ; afraid of the New Zealanders ; and afraid of the Caffres : and very justly so, being conscious that our only real desire respecting any of these nations has been to get as much out of them as we could. They have no right to complain of us, notwithstanding, since we have all, lately, lived ourselves in the daily endeavour to get as much out of our neighbours and friends as we could ; and having by this means, indeed, got a good deal out of each other, and put nothing into each other, the actually obtained result, this day, is a state of emptiness in purse and stomach, for the solace of which our boasted 'insular position' is ineffectual. I have listened to many ingenious persons, who say we are better off now than ever we were before. I do not know how well off we were before ; but I know positively that many very deserving persons of my acquaintance have great difficulty in living under these improved circumstances : also, that my desk is full of begging letters, eloquently written either by distressed or dishonest people ; and that we cannot be called, as a nation, well off, while so many of us are either living in honest or in villanous begging. For my own part, I will put up with this state of things, passively, not an hour longer. I am not an*

unselfish person, nor an Evangelical one ; I have no particular pleasure in doing good ; neither do I dislike doing it so much as to expect to be rewarded for it in another world. But I simply cannot paint, nor read, nor look at minerals, nor do anything else that I like, and the very light of the morning sky, when there is any—which is seldom, now-a-days, near London—has become hateful to me, because of the misery that I know of, and see signs of, where I know it not, which no imagination can interpret too bitterly. Therefore, as I have said, I will endure it no longer quietly ; but henceforward, with any few or many who will help, do my poor best to abate this misery. But that I may do my best, I must not be miserable myself any longer ; for no man who is wretched in his own heart, and feeble in his own work, can rightly help others. Now my own special pleasure has lately been connected with a given duty. I have been ordered to endeavour to make our English youth care somewhat for the Arts ; and must put my uttermost strength into that business. To which end I must clear myself from all sense of responsibility for the material distress around me, by explaining to you, once for all, in the shortest English I can, what I know of its causes ; by pointing out to you some of the methods by which it might be relieved ; and by setting aside regularly some small percentage of my income, to assist, as one of yourselves, in what one and all we shall have to do ; each of us laying by something, according to our means, for the common service ; and having amongst us, at last, be it ever so small, a National Store instead of a National Debt,”

And farther on:—\* “ *What am I, myself then, infirm and old, who take, or claim, leadership even of these lords? God forbid that I should claim it; it is thrust and compelled on me—utterly against my will, utterly to my distress, utterly, in many things, to my shame. But I have found no other man in England, none in Europe, ready to receive it,—or even desiring to make himself capable of receiving it. Such as I am, to my own amazement, I stand—so far as I can discern—alone in conviction, in hope, and in resolution, in the wilderness of this modern world. Bred in luxury, which I perceive to have been unjust to others, and destructive to myself; vacillating, foolish, and miserably failing in all my own conduct in life—and blown about hopelessly by storms of passion—I, a man clothed in soft raiment,—I, a reed shaken with the wind, have yet this Message to all men again entrusted to me: ‘Behold, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Whatsoever tree therefore bringeth not forth good fruit shall be hewn down, and cast into the fire.’*”

These words contain the foreshadowing and the justification of that much misunderstood scheme of St. George’s Guild. For seven years Mr. Ruskin wrote the monthly letters of the *Fors Clavigera*, in which the scheme was gradually unfolded. Briefly put, it starts from the proposition that no man, whatever his rank or wealth may be, is exempted from work and responsibility for that work; and that the noblest, as well as the most natural form of existence, is that spent in producing the first necessities of life,

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\* FORS. V., 58, 281.

viz., in agricultural labour. I need scarcely say that this is not the view of modern society. It seems to be held, now-a-days, that, while ownership of land is the most honourable social condition of man, labour *on* the land is, of all labour, the least honourable : whence it comes that the position of the agricultural labourer is, of all others, the most deplorable—Hodge having formed the theme of English caricature for the last half century as the type of animal stupidity. It is generally considered as the undoubted right and privilege of the landowner to keep bird and fish and beast in healthy life on his broad moors, and clear streams, although his tenants should starve in miserable hovels ; and, broadly speaking, it is held as the mark of a gentleman that he soil his hands with no manual labour, but kill time, and spend money in any destructive or harmless way he pleases.

The Guild then proposed to become a land-owning Society, carrying out the principles which Mr. Ruskin conceives that all land owners would carry out if they were patriotic instead of selfish. In his own words :—“ *The St. George's Guild consists of a body of persons who think, primarily, that it is time for honest persons to separate themselves intelligibly from knaves, announcing their purpose, if God helps them, to live in Godliness and honour, not in atheism and rascality : and who think, secondarily, that the sum which well-disposed persons usually set aside for charitable purposes, (namely, the tenth part of their income,) may be most usefully applied in buying*

*land for the nation, and entrusting the cultivation of it to a body of well taught and well cared for peasantry."*

So much has been said about the Utopianism of this scheme, that I may have some difficulty in convincing you that it is the practical project of a practical man. It has been saddled with the name of Communism, and I suppose that that name, in these days of shallow opinion, is enough to discredit any society. But Mr. Ruskin is a Communist—just as he is a Conservative—in a sense very different from the ordinary acceptance of the term. There is nothing in the constitution of the Guild which any consistent Christian could not approve of, and adhere to. Its members, indeed, bind themselves that they will not deceive, nor cause to be deceived, any human being for their gain or pleasure : nor hurt, nor cause to be hurt, any human being for their gain or pleasure : nor rob, nor cause to be robbed, any human being for their gain or pleasure—which might interfere with some operations of respectable commercial pursuits : and that they will not kill nor hurt any living creature needlessly, nor destroy any beautiful thing ; but will strive to save and comfort all gentle life, and guard and perfect all natural beauty, upon the earth—which might interfere with some of our sport, and much of our thoughtless cruelty. The idea of Communism has arisen from a confusion of the Guild with the labourers employed by it. We of the Guild, generally speaking, live exactly as we always did, in our usual avocations, not becoming anything more marked



in the world than, presumably, honest, God-fearing men. But, on the lands of the Guild, no steam machinery is allowed in agriculture—for reasons which I shall afterwards explain. The rivers are kept pure from pollution, and, generally speaking, all natural beauty is held as sacred. The farmer's rent is fixed for life, if he conform to the requirements of the Guild ; but is diminished for every improvement he makes on the land. The rents do not go to any private interest or dividend, but are paid back to the tenants in the shape of improvement of the Guild lands generally. No one is allowed to live in squalor or wretchedness, the first business of the Guild being to see that its tenants have the necessary conditions of healthy and happy life. The labourers under the Guild farmers are paid fixed wages, unalterable, undiminished in time of sickness ; and, when unable to work, they will think it no more shame to live on pension from the Guild than a government official thinks shame to take a pension from his government. On each estate the Guild provides the means of intellectual and physical recreation as well as education. The children are trained on the lines of education laid down for them by the founder of the Guild.

Is there anything in this so very unpractical ? It is true that we have here a Society paying in a tithe of the income of its members, and not expecting a five per cent. for it—not even a return of the principal ; which is something new, I am aware, in business circles. But it is a great organized

attempt to roll back the torrent of pauperism in Great Britain : it is based on the principle laid down in 'Latter Day Pamphlets,' that the only charity likely to be effectual is that which prevents the cause, rather than tries to cure the effect ; and so it undertakes the rearing of a new generation of labourers, under such conditions as will make a labouring man's life at least as free from temptation to excess and sin as that of the upper classes. Says Mr. Ruskin :—" *To divert a little of the large current of English charity and justice from watching disease to guarding health, and from the punishment of crime to the reward of virtue ; to establish, here and there, exercise grounds instead of hospitals, and training schools instead of penitentiaries, is not, if you will slowly take it to heart, a frantic imagination.*"

For my own part, I cannot but think that the Guild is more certain of practical result than any of our schemes of poor relief ; but, as I have no intention of entering into any defence of the Guild, I must refer you for further information to the seven volumes of the 'Fors,' with the warning that, unless you are prepared to read right through them, you had better not touch them. No writer suffers so much as Mr. Ruskin from being read in extracts, and you simply cannot understand the 'Fors Clavigera' unless you can read the great purpose developing itself all through.

I spoke before of the nobleness of Mr. Ruskin's Art life. Although it is really a minor sacrifice, a statement of the money he has spent for the good of others may be more im-

pressive to the many. The Chair of Art at Oxford being incomplete without an attached system of technical education in Art, Mr. Ruskin, in 1875, gave £5,000 to found a Mastership of Drawing connected with the Chair. At the same time he gave £2,000 more for a collection of drawings to be placed in the Schools. By 1875, roughly estimating his remaining fortune then at £70,000, he had given the tithe of it, viz., £7,000, to the Guild. In the same year he gave over some property in London, worth £3,500, to be managed for the Guild by Miss Hill. All that is left now of his immense fortune—no less than £150,000 in cash, left him by his father, besides houses and pictures,—is £12,000, yielding him £360 a year; and on this he lives in the house he loved as a child—Brantwood, on Coniston Lake. Of the manner in which the rest of that great fortune has been spent it would be out of place for me to speak, but I can safely affirm that John Ruskin has faithfully and nobly acted as steward of the wealth given to him, as to all men, for his Master's service and honour. And that he has proved by stripping himself to the lowest sum on which he can live the life of an English gentleman, full of dignified repose and grave simplicity, and yet dispense the hospitality which Brantwood is never slow to offer.

Thus far I have told you what I could of the public life of John Ruskin, and shown you its entire consistency with his writings—the whole manifesting devotion to the common good as at once its key-note and its harmony. But I should

be doing him an injustice were I to let you believe that the truth or falseness of his teaching would be shown by the success or failure of the St. George's Guild. Understand that the Guild is only the immediate plan he proposes to meet the present distress, and to amend the condition of the agricultural labourer. In fact, we may well believe that it was started to meet the reproach so often levelled at reformers, that they are wholly destructive, and cannot suggest anything definite in place of what they destroy. To such objections the St. George's Guild is standing answer:—Here is what a land-owner may do, and ought to do ; and, as all cannot become land-owners, let those who trust me band themselves together, and become at once a protesting, and a land-owning Society.

But before the 'Fors Clavigera' was ever written Mr. Ruskin was already famous as a master of ethics ; and, even if the passages bearing directly on the Guild were left out, the 'Fors' would still be a treasure house of the thoughts of a great man—the more interesting as the letter mode of publication allowed him to speak of matters occurring in the world at the time, instead of dealing with principles in the abstract.

By that part of my subject then which deals with the Work of John Ruskin, I mean the ethical and practical teaching which underlies all he has written on art and economies, and is the groundwork out of which the Guild of St. George sprang.

And, as it is obviously impossible to give a complete system of morals in the few minutes during which I dare detain you further, I will merely touch on the most prominent, or least understood parts of his teaching—content if I can show you that, however strange such teaching may be at first hearing, it is that of a man who, as he himself claims, has never preached an “opinion,” but always the truths accredited by all the great thinkers of the past, and, in consequence, much more likely to be true than our “drifted, helpless, entangled weed of customary thought.”

First, then, Mr. Ruskin, viewing the hurrying life of busy England, with the unprejudiced eye of one whose knowledge of the past had made him well acquainted with what history has proved true or false in the life of nations, and whose work on Art had taught him man’s true province and essential greatness as lord of Nature, came long ago to the same conclusion as Carlyle, that the condition of England was indeed most unsatisfactory—even ominous. To walk through the crowded streets of a great city; to look on the pinched faces that tell of want, and the low brutal foreheads that tell of sin—to say nothing of that terrible weltering mass of human misery in court and alley, whose only wholesome food is the prison fare, whose only fresh air is breathed in the prison court,—was an acute pain to one who, living constantly with Nature, saw that every creature in her domain was happy in its short day of life, except man. And, looking at the grim division between the criminal and the educated

classes, the question of the *rightness* of all this would arise :— Are we so much separated from their crime but by the conventional rules we are ashamed to break ? Is the accident of birth a thing that we have reason to consider entirely providential—except to ourselves ? Whether providential or not, have we done our duty by these fallen classes ? Or are our little schemes of poor relief much more after all than sops to our conscience—mere plantings in the quicksand ? Have we not erected prisons to restrain the vice we have not tried to eradicate ; nay, hospitals to cure the diseases we have caused ? In short, is crime a part of the divine world-plan, or are we men responsible for it ?

And when the silence of his lonely hills was broken by the blast of quarrying, and the loveliest vales and rivers of smiling England were filled up and polluted by men who measured God's work by its price per square yard, the sensitive heart could not but cry out :—Are we to become the world's workshop at such a cost ? Are other nations to have their happy homesteads, and their peaceful life among the green fields, while we do the dirty work of the world, and soil our hearts and degrade our manhood to produce cloth a farthing a yard cheaper than our neighbours ?

Setting himself then to answer these questions, Mr. Ruskin soon came to the conclusion that the love of money was undoubtedly, now as always, the root of all the evil, but that, in this age, it had assumed a proportion and a hideousness which it never had before in any country. And

the first issue which would naturally present itself to an artist's eye was the desecration of natural beauty for purposes of private gain.

In effect, he says that, next to the bodies of its citizens, the most precious possessions of a State are its natural and distinctive features of scenery—its mountains and valleys, lakes and rivers, trees and fields. Only in virtue of these, and of the memories which gather around them, is a nation patriotic. We, for example, are proud of our Scotch birth, not because we belong to this or that commercial centre, but because we are natives of the

*“ Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,  
Land of the mountain and the flood.”*

But what practically are we doing every day with our hills and streams? Instead of counting them as a sacred national charge, jealous over every encroachment or diminution of their beauty, we let any jolterhead who can scrape together a few pence buy the land and water, and do as he likes with them—turn them into an ash heap and a puddle if he pleases. For typical extract, take this :—\* *“ There was a rocky valley between Buxton and Bakewell, once upon a time, divine as the Vale of Tempe ; you might have seen the Gods there morning and evening—Apollo and all the sweet Muses of the Light—walking in fair procession on the lawns of it, and to and fro among the pinnacles of its crags. You cared*

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\* FORS I., 5, 10.

*neither for Gods nor grass, but for cash (which you did not know the way to get); you thought you could get it by what the 'Times' calls 'Railroad Enterprise.' You Enterprised a Railroad through the valley—you blasted its rocks away, heaped thousands of tons of shale into its lovely stream. The valley is gone, and the Gods with it ; and now, every fool in Buxton can be at Bakewell in half an hour, and every fool in Bakewell at Buxton ; which you think a lucrative process of exchange—you Fools Everywhere."*—The meaning of which passage is, that, in destroying a beautiful valley, no matter for what convenience and gain to the few, we are robbing the heritage of the poor—the heritage their Maker left them, of looking at His works at least, although they might never possess them.

To any thoughtful man the destruction of land and stream which goes on, quite uselessly except for private gain, is evident enough, and mournful enough ; and with any one who has the soul to read Scott and Burns, I do not need to plead for the preservation of our streams and glens from the sacrilegious hands which would destroy them, and, with them, all possibility of Scottish song for ever after.

I know that what I am saying may excite a smile from too many. The grievance may seem more fanciful than real : it may be true enough, you will say, of town districts, but consider the vast stretches of country lying around, where no such abuse exists. But is the small extent of fresh country around our great cities not serious enough? For



those who can afford it, it is easy enough to fly from the smoke and the grime, and you will note as a significant fact that town residents find it necessary to do so over the week ends in summer time. But what of those whose life is one unending round of degrading labour? Have we a right, we may well enquire, to enjoy the pure air for ourselves, while we make pure air an impossible luxury for our poor neighbours? And is the extent of smoke-bound territory so small? East and west and north and south rise the flames of iron furnaces and the smoke of factories, and wherever they rise the fields around grow dark, and the streams grow foul. More and more does the city, with its sins and its sorrows, encroach on the country. A seam of coal is found in the loveliest part of a smiling pasture land. Down goes the shaft, and the heap of ashes begins to gather at the pit mouth. The railway is projected, tunnelling and blasting and polluting. Hordes of railway navvies, with all the vice and rudeness of the town, are let loose on the peaceful village. And all for what? Not that labour may be abundant, and the labourer live: not that the public interests demand it:—do not think so. Most of our railways are projected, not from any view to public interest, far less from philanthropic motives, but that a few capitalists may be made richer.

Mr. Ruskin's words are no more forcible than true when he says:—\* “ *The benevolence involved in the construction of*

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\* FORS. IV., 47, 261.

*railways amounts exactly to this much and no more,—that if the British public were informed that engineers were now confident, after their practice in the Cenis and St. Gothard tunnels, that they could make a railway to Hell,—the British public would instantly invest in the concern to any amount ; and stop church-building all over the country, for fear of diminishing the dividends.”*

And all this is done by men who, honestly enough, consider the Heaven and Earth as God’s first revelation to man : who complacently read, “Consider the lilies, how they grow,” and are for ever taking away any possibility of our great city poor ever seeing any lilies to consider !

From nature Mr. Ruskin turned to our social system, and was not slow to find out the anomalies which most of us are aware of, but have not the courage to put so plainly into words. Briefly stated the position of society is this :—There are multitudes of labourers and workmen whose industry is dictated and guided, for good or evil, by a few rich men called capitalists and landowners ; and there is an immense class between the two which lives by exchanging commodities. This separation of destinies we who are not labourers, with admirable modesty, ascribe to Providence, tacitly assuming that the fact of a man’s being born in a certain rank in life expresses God’s opinion of it as the best possible place for him. And the present position of the land question is this, according to Mr. Ruskin,—that we generously lend the labourer our land, and generously lend

him tools, and we stand by with our hands in our pockets, while he digs. For this we allow him enough of the produce to keep him in life—barely enough sometimes ; and we pocket the rest as our right. What is the real meaning of all this ? Is it not an assumption on our part that God has been good enough to give money and land to us in virtue of which we make men our slaves, while we stand by and present a celestial appearance to them ? Now on what tenure is the land held ? “Some land has been bought ; some won by cultivation ; but the greater part, in Europe, seized originally by force of hand,” and actual possession, unquestioned during many generations, is the real tenure of most large landowners. Such a tenure will not long stand keen inspection ; and if the possession of land should ever be revised on principles of justice it will be seen that landholding is a trust given by the nation for the nation’s benefit ; that the only just claim which can now be made by any landowner is that he is worthy of the trust from the nation, and that he deserves it, not now by the right of fighting for it, but in virtue of a truer Captaincy—that of being first to share all dangers with his tenants, and first to lead all good work. In view of which wise Captaincy he will be indeed worthy to have such an income from the land as may keep him in all noble and beautiful life.

The modern landowner’s conception of himself is, I need not say, generally very different ; it is the altogether selfish

one, that the land exists for him, not he for the land, and that it is purely of grace or for gain that he allows anyone but himself to live on it—\* “*For, during the last eight hundred years,*” says Ruskin, “*the upper classes of Europe have been one large Picnic Party. Most of them have been religious also ; and in sitting down, by companies, upon the green grass, in parks, gardens, and the like, have considered themselves commanded into that position by Divine authority, and fed with bread from Heaven : of which they duly considered it proper to bestow the fragments in support, and the tithes in tuition, of the poor.*”

All this, friends, must be changed. Such a conception of landowner's position was only possible when the classes who worked were uneducated, and accepted their own position without question. But with the march of Education comes inevitably the march of Reform, and Reform, if resisted, means Revolution. The workers are learning—already have learned—that while it is indeed necessary that there should be higher and lower classes, these must be determined by a standard of worth and work—not of birth alone : that, just as in old times, the strongest won the land by his lance and kept it because he was the best man, so now all artificial barriers must be removed, and the man who is altogether worthiest must be allowed to win when he can, and keep by such wisdom as he has. The cry has been—and

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\* FORS I., 2, 15.

rightly has been—Educate, Educate, but we must accept the consequences of education. We have raised an immense class to think, and we have given them the sharpest inducement to think by making their surroundings so altogether unbearable ; we have made the advantage of the rich over the poor the more conspicuous as we widened the gulf between the two. Do not think our social anomalies will long stand the fierce glare cast on them by emancipated minds. There is only one way to escape the fell torrent of revolution that will soon sweep from one end of Europe to the other, and that is—to lead it. The agitation in Ireland at the present time is only the beginning of the storm. The Irish people have caught at a part of a great truth, namely, that the land was meant for the many, not for the few. What the consequences of this half truth may be, unless the landowners have the courage to accept the situation and lead the reform, Heaven alone knows. The despair of a great people who imagine they are in the right is apt to take many a mad and bloody direction.

I have spoken mainly of the land interest, but similar thoughts suggest themselves as regards other interests. When the possession of land is questioned, the possession of capital may soon enough come under the same keen glance. And will it not be found that here the same truth holds,—that, in all rightness, those who have the wealth must hold it principally for the common good, and not for selfish purposes? Rightly understood, for example, nothing

would be esteemed more noble than the vocation of the merchant—to feed, clothe, and provide for the nation ; and when our merchants get into their heads the truth so well set forth in ‘Unto this Last,’ that, just as the duty of the soldier is to defend the nation, of the pastor to teach it, of the physician to keep it in health, and of the lawyer to dispense justice in it, so the first and most honourable duty of the merchant is to *provide* for the nation, we shall see such a beginning of national life as will make England once more the centre of the world.

But Mr. Ruskin for many years has seen what is the canker in our national history—namely, that we have no true patriotism. We are no longer a nation so much as an aggregate of individuals, seeking each one his own interests, and, generally, disregarding all others. We have forgotten that a nation’s first duty is to rear all its sons and daughters in healthy life, and to disregard or over-ride every private interest which interferes with that. And we have allowed the greed of gold to corrupt our national as well as our individual conscience. What can be thought of a nation’s honour when the first question in a European war is—“how will it affect the bondholders?” Is it not the case that year after year we have sunk millions in Turkish and Egyptian loans, fully conscious, if we cared to think, that the interest on these was squeezed out of an unhappy people by a rapacious government? Is it not notorious that in the last Cape War the savages were found armed with breechloaders

smuggled to them, against all law, by British merchants? Is it not the case that during the Indian Famine of 1876 enormous exports of corn were made from the very districts where the natives were dying in thousands? These are not exceptional cases; only more noticeable because on a larger scale, and on a national stage. They are the legitimate outcome of our commercial maxim—"buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest."

I venture to say that there is no more significant sign of the utter absence of the spirit of Christ from the business world than the fact, that such a maxim passes unchallenged as a standard law of business morality. For what does it mean? Let me put it in Mr. Ruskin's own words:—  
 \* "*Suppose three sailors cast away on an uninhabited coast, and obliged to maintain themselves there by their own labour for a series of years. Suppose two of them separate to farm different pieces of land at some distance from each other along the coast; each estate furnishing a distinct kind of produce, and each more or less in need of the material raised on the other. Suppose that the third man, in order to save the time of all three, undertakes simply to superintend the transference of commodities from one farm to the other; on condition of receiving some sufficiently remunerative share of every parcel of goods conveyed, or of some other parcel received in exchange for it. If this carrier or messenger always brings to each estate, from the*

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\* UNTO THIS LAST, 49 & 55.

*other, what is chiefly wanted, at the right time, the operations of the two farmers will go on prosperously, and the largest possible result in produce, or wealth, will be attained by the little community. But suppose no intercourse between the land-owners is possible, except through the travelling agent; and that, after a time, this agent, watching the course of each man's agriculture, keeps back the articles with which he has been entrusted until there comes a period of extreme necessity for them, on one side or other, and then exacts in exchange for them all that the distressed farmer can spare of other kinds of produce; it is easy to see that by ingeniously watching his opportunities, he might possess himself regularly of the greater part of the superfluous produce of the two estates, and at last, in some year of severest trial or scarcity, purchase both for himself, and maintain the former proprietors thenceforward as his labourers or servants. This would be a case of commercial wealth acquired on the exactest principles of modern political economy."*

The truth of all this, in simple case, is self-evident, and to see that it applies in the complex operations of modern commerce only requires conscientious thinking. And, if you carry out the principle of true commerce further, you will find that the manufacturer exists for the sake of the workmen employed by him, and is responsible to a considerable extent for the bodies and souls of his employés as well as for the fabric they produce. You will find that the merchant exists that he may exchange articles in such a way as to benefit both him who buys and him who sells. But if we were



to imagine it possible that our physician might carry out *his* profession on commercial principles ; might first of all make us ill that he might be called in, and then keep us ill that he might get paid for attendance, we should find out the fallacy of our commerce sooner. Undoubtedly Mr. Ruskin is right when he says that the learned professions and the army have been esteemed so much more honourable than the mercantile, because they are presumed to be mainly unselfish, holding their life and work for the common good, while the present principle of commerce is supposed, and rightly supposed, to be in the main a selfish one.

But Mr. Ruskin was not content with exposing the degradation of our ideas in regard to commerce ; was not content even in pointing the remedy ; but he searched into the causes of this wide-spread contagion of sordidness, with a very curious result. The greed of gold had, presumably, been as strong in other nations of the past, and the fearful want of appreciation of their responsibility on the part of the wealthy had had a parallel in other times ; but never with such wide-spread and disastrous results. Mr. Ruskin found the explanation in that which is almost the foundation of all modern commerce—the taking of usury or interest for the use of money.

Bear with me if I venture, in the face of almost certain incredulity on your part, to lay before you in a few sentences the good reasons he has for this belief. And that you may not be hardened into indifference by so many hard sayings about

our modern life put into one short address, I may say that Mr. Ruskin himself sees that our commercial pursuits are so entirely rooted in this wrong principle that the present conditions of life must all suffer an immense reform, before a change can be made in this : only he says of it as of all his teaching ;—" I tell you what is truth, and I have nothing in the world to do with whether it is practicable at present or not."

His reasons against usury then are these. First,—It is absolutely forbidden in the Word of God. All the Levitical law is against it ; the prophets repeatedly denounce it ; and the Fifteenth Psalm—" Lord, who shall abide in Thy Tabernacle? . . . the man that putteth not his coin to usury," is quite sufficient proof for any one who wishes it. The strongest passage against it in the New Testament, in the Parable of the Talents, has by a curious misreading been repeatedly quoted in its favour, whereas the very conception of God as an 'hard man' shows the text clearly to mean—" You call me an hard man ; if I had been so I would not have scrupled to take usury, that simplest way of gathering where I had not strawed ; so you are without excuse.' We might as well imagine that our Lord, in the similar parable, meant to represent Himself as the Unjust Judge who feared not God neither regarded man, as imagine that He meant to represent Himself here as an hard man who commended usury." Second,—It taxes the labour of those to whom the loan is made : to make a profit, as

well as pay the interest, they must work harder and longer than the possessor of the capital, who has only to work for his profit. The attempt to evade this law is the explanation of shoddy manufactures. Third,—It is a means of making money without work and without responsibility, whereas no man, in the true conception of things, has a right to cause or command labour of which he cannot know the justness, alike in the course of the work and in its consequence. The principle is seen at its height when the nation flings its money rapturously into a five per cent. loan to some people whose whole career is in contradiction to all we hope for from our truly enlightened civilization. Fourth,—Every great statesman of the past has denounced it, and we are not yet wise enough to despise the wisdom of our fathers. Fifth,—Great commerce has been, and great commercial nations have flourished, where usury was unknown, or the practice of it branded with disgrace.

I leave this point now without further defence. I know that our commercial world is not yet capable of forming an impartial opinion where its interests are so much involved : and I have done as much as I could hope for, if I unsettle your minds on the unquestioned rightness of interest—of which I daresay you before have had no doubt, and if what I have said may lead you at least to doubt whether it is altogether Christian to lend a poor relation a few pounds, and charge him five per cent. for it.

For men do not exist primarily to buy and sell, but to do justly and to love mercy. It is a very small matter whether

by our trade we become poor or rich, but it is a very great matter as regards ourselves before God that no human being should be hurt or destroyed by what we make the business of our lives.

There is one other point which I must take up, not that it is perhaps the most important, but that it is the least understood—it is Mr. Ruskin's teaching on machinery. I often hear it said "Ruskin objects to steam and machinery;" and this is generally enough to condemn Mr. Ruskin for ever in the mind of a man of the world. But this is not altogether true. You will find in Mr. Ruskin's works some very gigantic proposals of tidal and water-driven machinery. But he certainly objects, and in the strongest manner, to the abuse of machinery. To do by machine without thought what might be as well done by hand seems a foolish and a simple thing to him. For instance: he objects to a steam reaping machine, while willing reapers, who would have had the healthy discipline of honest labour, are sent starving about the country; idleness producing *its* crop certain enough without steam power, and for net result such a harvest of vice and wretchedness as we have to spend millions yearly to gather into jails and poorhouses.

His own words give the gist of the matter:—\* "*Observe. A man and a woman, with their children, properly trained, are able easily to cultivate as much ground as will feed them;*

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\* FORS I., 5, 10.

*to build as much wall and roof as will lodge them, and to weave as much cloth as will clothe them. They can all be perfectly happy and healthy in doing this. Supposing that they invent machinery that will build, plough, thresh, cook, and weave, and that they have none of these things any more to do, but may read, or play croquet, or cricket, all day long, I believe myself that they will neither be so good nor so happy as without the machines. But I waive my belief in this matter for the time. I will assume that they become more refined and moral persons, and that idleness is in future to be the mother of all good. But observe, I repeat, the power of your machine is only in enabling them to be idle. It will not enable them to live better than they did before, nor to live in greater numbers. Get your heads quite clear on this matter. Out of so much ground only so much living is to be got, with or without machinery. You may set a million of steam ploughs to work on an acre, if you like—out of that acre only a given number of grains of corn will grow, scratch or scorch it as you will. So that the question is not at all whether, by having more machines, more of you can live. No machines will increase the possibilities of life. They only increase the possibilities of idleness. Suppose, for instance, you could get the oxen in your plough driven by a goblin, who would ask for no pay, not even a cream-bowl,—(you have nearly managed to get it driven by an iron goblin, as it is ;)—Well, your furrow will take no more seeds than if you had held the stilts yourself. But, instead of holding them, you sit, I presume, on a bank beside the*

*field, under an eglantine ;—watch the goblin at his work, and read poetry. Meantime, your wife in the house has also got a goblin to weave and wash for her. And she is lying on the sofa reading poetry.*

*“ Now, as I said, I don’t believe you would be happier so, but I am willing to believe it ; only since you are already such brave mechanists, show me at least one or two places where you are happier. Let me see one small example of approach to this seraphic condition. I can show you examples, millions of them, of happy people, made happy by their own industry. Farm after farm I can show you, in Bavaria, Switzerland, the Tyrol, and such other places, where men and women are perfectly happy and good, without any iron servants. Show me, therefore, some English family, with its fiery familiar, happier than these. Or bring me,—for I am not unconvinced by any kind of evidence,—bring me an evidence of an English family or two to their increased felicity. Or if you cannot do so much as that, can you convince even themselves of it ? They are perhaps happy, if only they knew how happy they were : Virgil thought so, long ago, of simple rustics ; but you hear at present your steam-propelled rustics are crying out that they are anything else than happy, and that they regard their boasted progress ‘ in the light of a monstrous Sham.’ ”*

Generally speaking Mr. Ruskin objects to the labour of any man being turned into a mechanical exercise, instead of the healthful play of brain and sinew ; knowing that, while labour is indeed cursed, it is divinely redeemed

from the curse in the true pleasure which the workman has in putting heart and taste and character into his work. It is the great distinction between the mechanical and the artistic. An artist,—a creator, is the highest type of man in work : the man who turns the handle of a machine which turns out the entire finished article, perhaps the lowest ; but between these there are all grades of work, and in proportion as you rise to the artist, as in all fine handwork, or sink to the mechanic, as in self-acting machine work, do you raise or lower man. Mr. Ruskin believes that the strong tendency of trade at present is to supplant man by machinery, or to subordinate man to machinery : in the one case you make England a machine shop instead of a happy country ; in the other you make men the slaves of thankless, heartless toil.

The answer may be made, as I have heard it :—But machinery must supplant hard labour unless you put a limit to the discovery and perfecting of machinery, and what justification can be offered for restraining mechanical ingenuity and inventiveness ? To which I have little doubt Mr. Ruskin would merely reply :—If the few should happen to be spending their lives in inventing machines for the many to kill themselves with, the sooner you put an end to such beneficent invention the better.

Consider what the apotheosis of all our modern trade would be. Our country would become all riddled with coalpits and mines, and the bank of dross would become the

prominent feature in *all* landscapes as it is now around this city. Our hills would be blasted and torn for minerals—the veins of ore within being counted more gracious than the red heather without. Our rivers would become slimy canals, smoking with the drains and refuse of innumerable mills. Everywhere convenient would stand a five-storey factory filled with machines, at which a dull workman, or, better, a worn-out woman—she would work cheaper—would stand listlessly, perhaps turning a crank every hour or so,—the machine meantime running on from hour to hour with the minimum of attention. The men and women of this commercial Paradise would live always within shadow of their workplace, and would be content with the very smallest wages possible to keep life in. Of course the men would not be able to afford the luxury of marriage, so there might be some scarcity of workers in the next generation, but that would only be providential, as machinery would have made man quite a useless and expensive article. The condition of the millowners might not be quite so satisfactory as one would expect. In such a celestial state of things they ought to have been very wealthy, and lived in fine country seats away from their work people; but, unfortunately, the country would then be only a memory, thanks to coal-pits, mines, and mills, and there would be neither salmon fishing nor grouse shooting. And besides, on the ‘cheapest market’ principle, the wealth would be mostly in the hands of the exchangers, called merchants,



and the poor millowners would be finding out the beneficent results of the usury system by having money lent them, instead of lending it. If, however, the love of something beautiful should still exist, it would be very easy to adopt Mr. Ruskin's suggestion, and raise a new platform on iron scaffolding above this ; and by pulverizing the mountains, and strewing the duly pulverized and, by wise medical geology, drugged materials, over the upper stages, to obtain quite a creditable stretch of green fields above. These however would be duly monopolized by the rich, and our present ingenious manufactures would be carried on by the poor in the dark lower storeys. For this apotheosis, when it is accomplished, and when you get all you are striving to attain, as Ruskin says, may the Lord make you truly thankful !

I know it will immediately be said :—" This is begging the whole question ; what is the use of arguing on an extravagantly imagined abuse of anything ?" But is this apotheosis so extravagant ? Is it not already sufficiently realized in the life of the great working population of towns like Wigan or St. Helens ?

What, then, is the practical issue of all Mr. Ruskin's teaching ? You may be ready enough to grant the wrongness of things as they are, and you may also grant that Mr. Ruskin's views are right in theory at least. But you will say—" Is it possible under present conditions to do otherwise than our neighbours ?"

My friends, we have to blame such an argument, thoughtlessly and so far criminally adduced, as the cause of almost all the mischief that is.—\* “*You have thought things would right themselves,*” says Ruskin, “*or that it was God’s business to right them, not yours. Peremptorily, it is yours. Not, observe, to get your rights, but to put things to rights. Some eleven in the dozen of the population of the world are occupied earnestly in putting things to wrongs, thinking to benefit themselves thereby. Is it any wonder, then, you are uncomfortable, when already the world, in our part of it, is over-populated, and eleven in the dozen of the over-population doing diligently wrong, and the remaining dozenth expecting God to do their work for them?*”

A beginning of reform must be made ; and it must be made by the upper classes, or the march of reform will soon leave no upper classes to do anything. Sacrifice there must be, but the time is yet far distant when any great good can be done without sacrifice ; and, when it does come, virtue will have lost what makes it virtue—the glory of being its own reward. In one thing we can all follow Mr. Ruskin—in resolute protest against all we know to be evil, and in unselfish devotion of our lives to rectify all we know to be unjust.

I have spoken of Mr. Ruskin, his life, and his work, and have tried to crowd into one short hour what I have been

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\* FORS II., 17 I.

years of learning. In attempting a general survey I have been forced to do injustice to all the topics I have touched—to give conclusions without adequate statement of the premises. Do not, I beg of you, take my words as anything but the barest shadow of a shadow of all he has taught. I feel overpowered and helpless when I think of how little I have told you of that vast store-house of far-reaching wisdom, and how faint has been my echo of his wonderful words. Of himself I beg you to listen : to read before you criticize : above all, to understand before you condemn ; and, incredulous as you may be now, you will end, I am confident, in saying with me that, of all men in this century, the spirit of Him who went about continually doing good breathes through the entire Life and Work of John Ruskin.



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